

Pacolet and the Outside World - Newspapers, Radio, TV, Telephones Telegrams, Etc.

Newspapers

In looking back at it, I have been struck by how important Charlotte, North Carolina was to getting the news in Pacolet in the 1940s and 1950s. I remember that many of my relatives subscribed to the Charlotte newspaper, the *Charlotte Observer*. Charlotte was closely connected to Spartanburg by the railroad. It was possible to mail a letter in Spartanburg to someone in Charlotte and they would receive it the same day. See [Pacolet Mills Post Office](#). This also made it possible to get current issues of the newspaper. As discussed later, the first TV broadcast available in Pacolet was also from Charlotte.



Charlotte Observer from May 7, 1937 with headlines about the *Hindenberg* crash.

In the 1940s, 1950s and through the 60s, Spartanburg had two newspapers. *The Spartanburg Herald* was a morning newspaper and the *Spartanburg Journal* came out in the afternoon. During [World War II](#), most adults in Pacolet read these papers avidly to keep up with the war news. It seems that [every family had someone in the services](#) and any possible news was welcomed. In about 1982, the papers combined and the *Journal* was no longer published as a separate paper in the afternoon. (It is a shame that Spartanburg no longer has a truly local newspaper. The paper still has the same name but it is a part of a chain that covers several towns. Basically, the newspaper for Spartanburg, Greenville and Asheville is now the same newspaper with very minor changes. The present Spartanburg paper seems to have no interest in local news. It seems much more interested in covering sports and so-called celebrities than providing real news.)

Starting in April, 1949, the Pacolet community had its own newspaper. The [Pacolet Mills Manufacturing Company](#) sponsored and started a monthly newspaper, *The Pacolet Neigh*. This little newspaper is a wealth of information on the people and happenings during the time it was published. Some copies can be read at [The Pacolet Neigh Newspaper](#).

There was another unusual little newspaper named *Grit* that was widely available during the 1940s and 1950s. It did not contain any local news but was a national paper that seemed intended for rural audiences. It contained a variety of advertisements for all sorts of things.

Radio

Today, with all the possible sources of electronic entertainment, it is just hard to imagine how important the radio was in people's lives. This was true in the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s when TV began to be widespread. Almost every family had a radio. It was their link with the outside world for news and entertainment. In the 1940s there weren't many radio stations available in Pacolet. I remember **WSPA** in Spartanburg and **WBT** in Charlotte. Later, there was **WORD**, also from Spartanburg. There was one powerful station in Cincinnati that could be heard over much of the eastern part of the country, late at night. Its call sign was **WCKY** and it played lots of country music. Later, the Nashville station, **WSM**, became available and carried *The Grand Ole Opry* program that was very popular. It still survives to this day.

The daytime radio programs in the afternoon called "Soap Operas" were very popular. They were called this because they were usually sponsored by soap companies. There were several of these and they had a continuing dramatic story. Supposedly, most of the audience for these were women and everybody had their favorite show. However, it was not unusual for men to be "secret" listeners to these programs.

Radios, back then, were considerably larger than today. The radios used large glass vacuum tubes rather than the transistors and solid state electronics of today. There were both table model radios and much larger freestanding consoles almost like a piece of furniture. In the early 1950s, a phonograph to play records was sometimes built into the same radio console.



Large floor model console radio. These were much more expensive than table models.



Table model radio. My family had a Zenith radio very similar to this one.



Families often gathered around the radio to listen to it. This was especially true if it was important news. This picture shows a family listening to the news about the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Radios in cars did not become common until in the 1950s. Like home radios, they depended on vacuum tubes and often were not reliable. It was not at all unusual for a car radio, even in a fairly new car, not to work. Another drawback to early car radios was that the vacuum tubes used lots of power. If you forgot to turn the car radio off it would often drain your car battery and the car would not start the next time you tried to use it.



Inside a table model radio showing the vacuum tubes and speaker.

Television

Television did not become available in the Pacolet area until about 1949 or 50. The first TV station broadcasting to Pacolet was **WBTB** in Charlotte. At first it was very limited. It only broadcast from about 7 PM to midnight. My aunt and uncle, Althea and Bill Hughes, lived next door to us and had the first television around. The picture tube was tiny, maybe 6" x 8". It was about the size of a paperback book. The picture was in black and white and pretty grainy. For about an hour before the real broadcast started, the station transmitted a test pattern. This was a stationary image of lines. Television was such a novelty that sometimes we just visited them to see the test pattern. The early programming, if it can be called that, was also very limited. The most popular thing seemed to be professional wrestling. The TV station signed off at midnight by again playing the test pattern and the national anthem.



Early model black and white TV.

It seemed that by 1951, lots of folks had a television and in just a couple of years the screens had gotten quite a bit bigger. TV programming also improved a great deal in a very short time. Shows such as *Howdy Doody* and *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* became popular. By the mid-1950s, other stations such as Spartanburg, Greenville and Asheville were available in Pacolet. Color TV broadcasting did not appear until about 1965.

Telephones

Today, when everyone, including kids in grammar school, have their own phone it is hard to believe that once telephones were very rare in Pacolet.

Almost no private home in Pacolet had a telephone in the 1930s and 40s. General telephone service did not come to Pacolet until about 1950. The phone went from being a luxury to a necessity. For many years, almost everyone had a “party line”. This meant that you might have to share your telephone with several other families. Each family had its own telephone number and its own special ring. However, if you picked up the phone to make a call, instead of a dial tone you might hear one of your “party line” member’s conversation. You would have to wait until their conversation was over before you could get the dial tone and make your own call. “Listening” in was a favorite pastime of many.

[Judge Bruce Littlejohn](#) grew up in Pacolet. At one time he was the Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court. After his retirement, he wrote a book about growing up in Pacolet. It can be read on this website at

[Pacolet's I Have Known](#). On page 28 of his book he has an interesting discussion about the phone system in Pacolet in his youth.

For a long time after telephones became available, it was expensive and often difficult to make a long-distance call. Long-distance meant a call outside your immediate area. If I remember correctly, it was also quite a stretch as to what the telephone company considered to be a long-distance call. I'm pretty sure that it was long-distance to make a call from Pacolet to Gaffney or Union. Generally, it took a special occasion to have to make a long-distance call. You were charged by the minute and you had to go through a special long-distance operator who actually placed the call. Evidently, there must have been a limited number of long-distance lines because often they were busy and you had to keep trying. Long-distance connections were frequently weak and it was often hard to hear the other party. If you were making a long distance call from your home telephone, the cost of the call would be added to your regular monthly bill. In the early days of telephones, every call, even local ones, had to be placed by the operator. To contact the operator you lifted the receiver and she came online. You would tell her the number you wanted and she would actually make the connection at her switchboard. By the time telephones came into general use in Pacolet, this method had been replaced by the rotary dialing system. The telephone had a large round dial with 10 numbers. Each number had a hole in the dial so that it could be selected and the dial turned until it was stopped. Eventually, the system was replaced by pushbuttons that are still common on land lines.



Before the widespread availability of telephones and houses, people often used payphones. In this era of everyone having a cell phone, pay telephones have about disappeared. Once they were very important. I can remember two of the first pay telephones that were very convenient. One was in [The Hall](#), near the pool tables. The other was in the yard of [Mr. Rod Berry's Gulf filling station](#) at the corner of Highway 150 and what is now, Hwy 9. Both of these were in telephone booths with a door that you could be closed for privacy and better hearing.

It was a little more complex to make a long-distance call from a pay telephone. You had to have the correct amount of change available. After the long-distance operator had the number you were calling, you had to pre-pay for the call for a certain number of minutes. After you inserted the right amount of change, the operator completed your connection. When that amount of time was up, the operator broke into the conversation and told you your time was up. To continue, you had to deposit more coins. If you didn't have the coins your call was ended.

It would be many years before cell phones, answering machines, texting or APPS came on the scene.



Telegrams

Western Union telegrams no longer exist. Western Union sent its last telegram in 2006. However, before the widespread use of the telephone they were very important. This was a document, delivered personally by a Western Union messenger in an automobile or a bicycle in cities. They were fairly expensive and charged by the word. Telegrams were critical during [World War II](#) but it seemed that the telegrams often carried bad news – or terrible news. The US government used telegrams to notify the family of someone in service if their family member had been wounded, missing in action or killed. During the war, people dreaded getting a telegram. However, sometimes the news was good. The telegram would

bring word that the family member formerly listed as missing in action had been captured and was now alive and a prisoner of war. This was much better news about someone who had been captured by the Germans rather than the Japanese. The Japanese were notoriously cruel and barbaric to the prisoners.

There are examples of telegrams and more information about them at

[World War II](#)

Magazines

There were lots of magazines available during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Probably, the most popular was *Life Magazine* because of its war coverage. It was published weekly and was mostly pictures. Another popular magazine was the *Saturday Evening Post*. Its covers by the artist, Norman Rockwell, were always a big hit. The *Readers Digest* was a small, monthly magazine that was very popular. It was often read cover to cover by many. Some of the other magazines widely read, were *Pageant*, *Coronet* and *Esquire*. Lots of rural families read *The Progressive Farmer*.

There were a number of magazines about movie and film stars. There were also many magazines devoted to crime, police and detective stories. One category of popular magazines of the time is hard to describe. These were all involved with “romance stories” in some form or fashion. There were many magazines like this.

I think most people received their magazines through the mail. However, Pacolet Mills had an unusual service that brought the magazines and many other things right to your door. [Mr. Jesse Glass](#) had a car that was filled with magazines, fruit, food of different kinds and a variety of other things. Once a week, he drove his car throughout the mill village selling these items to people. Magazines were one of his big sellers. People looked forward to Mr. Glass making his rounds. At one time Mr. Glass had been the [Pacolet Mills Postmaster](#). [Mr. Glass also had a small store located in Central Pacolet that sold many items.](#)

During the modern era of electronic entertainment, almost all of these magazines have disappeared.

Libraries

To my knowledge, there were no public libraries available in Pacolet until around the 1960s. All of the schools had small libraries for use during the school year but not during the summer. Sometime during the 1940s, the Spartanburg County

Library started sending a “Bookmobile” to the Pacolet area. This was a big panel truck filled with bookshelves and a variety of books. I believe these came on a weekly basis and one of the scheduled stops was in front of [Coleman’s Store](#) . It was a big occasion when the bookmobile came.



A bookmobile in Charleston in 1948.

What will the future bring?

Just in my lifetime, the technological advancement in communications has been mind-boggling. We have every day devices that would have been considered science-fiction in the 40s and 50s. During that era, there was a newspaper comic strip about a detective, Dick Tracy. He had a wrist radio that he could use to talk to his office. Today, my great-grandchildren, still in grammar school, have wrist devices that far surpass the Dick Tracy’s wrist radio. They can talk to their parents while playing outside. While hiking in the woods they can use a GPS feature of the device to show where they are and how to get back home. Their parents can use their own smart phones to track where their children, with the wrist devices, are located. I don’t think we can begin to un-derstand what the future will bring.

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